

Pearls (short version)

Obtained from pearl oysters, natural pearls have been harvested in Ise-Shima for centuries. Natural pearls, once prized as “mermaid’s tears”, are rare. In the late 1800s, researchers attempted to cultivate pearls. Toba-born Mikimoto Kokichi (1858–1954) succeeded in making hemispherical pearls in 1893 for the first time in the world. The subsequent efforts of Mise Tatsuhei (1880–1924) and Nishikawa Tokichi (1874–1909) led to them also obtaining patents for pearl cultivation methods, leading to the development of spherical pearls. Even before World War II, Ise-Shima’s pearls were highly sought after and sold not only in Japan but also in Europe and the United States. Ise-Shima is today home to hundreds of companies involved in the pearl industry.

Cultivated pearls are made by inserting irritants into the oyster shells. Nacre (pearl-forming liquid) is secreted around the irritants. In about one to two years, this develops into a pearl. To cultivate pearls successfully in the shell, great care and skills are necessary. Ise-Shima’s sheltered bays and temperate climate offer the perfect conditions for pearl shells.

Visitors to Ise-Shima National Park can experience the area’s pearl legacy firsthand, either by extracting pearls themselves or by joining a pearl necklace-making workshop.